

# The Legibility of Literacy in Composition’s Great Debate: Revisiting “Romantics on Writing” and the History of Composition

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## ABSTRACT

This essay revisits two proposals for the abolition of compulsory freshman English: Thomas Lounsbury’s “Compulsory Composition in Colleges” in 1911 and Oscar James Campbell’s “The Failure of Freshman English” in 1939. It demonstrates how the New Literacy Studies provides a generative theoretical perspective from which to make more visible the assumptions, definitions, and attitudes about literacy that perpetuate the compulsory composition debate.

## KEYWORDS

the abolition debate, literacy, literacy studies, the New Literacy Studies, freshman composition, compulsory composition, first-year writing, literacy myth, literacy crisis, Thomas Lounsbury, Oscar James Campbell

Literacy is not the only problem, nor is it the only solution.

—Harvey J. Graff, *The Labyrinths of Literacy*

We want to believe that every American needs to know how to read and write. The result is that no academic topic seems quite so durable a legislative—and media and popular—concern as America’s apparently chronic literacy crisis: the real or imagined breakdowns in the reading and writing that we consider so central to the successful operation of our democracy. With that sort of presence always looming over Composition, anything can happen.

—Stephen North, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*

**A**lthough no foundational text on the debate over compulsory composition exists, Robert Connors's article, "The New Abolitionism: Toward a Historical Background" comes closest. In it he suggests that complaints about freshman composition are symptoms of more general social, ideological, and cultural trends. In addition, Connors's account records the complex and sustained history of the debate, but questions remain, especially with respect to underlying attitudes about literacy: How do scholars advocating abolition of compulsory composition characterize literacy? To what extent do definitions of literacy vary across proposals to abolish and reform freshman English? In what ways do arguments on all sides of the debate depend on notions of literacy crisis and decline? How might this debate function as a site for exploring the actual and ostensible differences that grow out of the institutional contexts of literacy among students, teachers, and administrators?

David R. Russell's characterizations of literacy and its role in the debate over composition's abolition raise similar questions. "Romantics on Writing: Liberal Culture and the Abolition of Composition Courses" is less comprehensive than Connors's examination; it focuses on only two proposals for the abolition of compulsory composition: Thomas L. Lounsbury's in 1911 and Oscar James Campbell's in 1939. In his often-cited essay, Russell analyzes the arguments that the two abolitionists "used to attack" freshman composition and explores some of their underlying assumptions, specifically those assumptions supporting the rise of liberal culture. For Russell, these assumptions are tied to what James A. Berlin describes as "Brahminical romanticism," a culture opposed to the "democratic, vocational, and scientific orientation" of universities during the period of academic specialization between 1870 and 1920 (133). It is important, according to Russell, to explore liberal culture as an underlying assumption of opposition to freshman composition because these assumptions continue "to fuel the conflicts within English studies" between what he understands to be "teachers of literature and of literacy" (132). To be fair, it should not come as a surprise that concerns about literacy remain implicit orientations for Russell's and Connors's studies. Neither author sets out to address this aspect of the "Great Debate" specifically. Connors aspires to situate complaints about compulsory composition in historical, social, and economic contexts. Russell delineates the fundamental characteristics and origins of liberal culture, connecting consequences of this movement to attacks against compulsory composition. Thus, when literacy is addressed in these studies it is done so in anecdotal and figurative terms.

For example, in speculating about connections between reformist periods and attitudes about literacy, Connors notes that during reformist periods, freshman composition is seen as the "thin red line protecting the very life of literacy" (3). Connors's propositions are compelling, but the implications of such statements remain unclear because literacy itself remains uncomplicated in Connors's inquiry. Connors and Russell do not associate varied attitudes about the uses, abuses, and functions of literacy with proposals for composition's abolition. As such, the appeal—or lure—of compulsory composition abolition and reform is exclusively linked to literary and educational movements like Romanticism, the rise of liberal culture, and the politics of English studies, rather than the overriding

influence of both English instructors' and students' abiding belief in literacy acquisition to realize the aims of higher education more generally. Furthermore, existing accounts of the "Great Debate" do not explore how different conceptualizations of literacy, specifically those understandings that exaggerate the powers of literacy, have informed attempts to reform and change freshman composition on both theoretical and practical levels.

More recently, however, David Fleming's *From Form to Meaning: Freshman Composition and the Long Sixties, 1957-1974* establishes promising links between attitudes about literacy and the history of freshman composition, especially complaints about the course's effectiveness. *From Form to Meaning* is primarily concerned with the events surrounding the remedialization of English 101 and subsequent abolition of English 102 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1968. In his introduction, Fleming discusses how the general public's anxiety "about the ability of young people to write correctly and well" (4) has regularly manifested itself in the form of literacy crises. Fleming rightly connects these crises to a host of cultural and economic pressures, arguing that "anxiety about adolescent writing" is persistent (even "perpetual") and that

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"changes in the economy, society, and culture do appear to exacerbate that anxiety" (8). In the end, however, even though Fleming speaks to the ways that literacy crises provoke educational reforms (4) and unnecessarily burden young writers (8-9), his interest in literacy seems restricted to noting that literacy crises are ever-present. I do not dispute this fact, and I believe Fleming's study to be an invaluable resource for understanding the circumstances behind the events that occurred at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1960s. That said, I also believe an examination of latent attitudes and definitions of literacy in specific proposals for composition's abolition and reform can offer teacher-researchers even more, especially in terms of understanding why the debate over composition has persisted for so long.

Thus, in this study, I re-read two proposals for the abolition of compulsory freshman English: Thomas Lounsbury's "Compulsory Composition in Colleges" in 1911 and Oscar James Campbell's "The Failure of Freshman English" in 1939. As I mentioned, in "Romantics on Writing," David Russell examines both Lounsbury and Campbell; he argues that Romanticism and liberal culture are the driving forces behind these studies. I take up the same studies in this article because I wish to show how the New Literacy Studies (NLS) provides a generative theoretical lens and different perspective from which to consider the compulsory composition debate. In this way, my inquiry challenges teacher-researchers who assume that the thematic commitment of literacy is "well-traveled" ground in composition studies. Although many have participated in and examined the

debate over compulsory composition—while this ground is in fact “well traveled”—as a field, because we have not acknowledged the role of the “myths” and “legacies of literacy” (Graff, *Labyrinths*) in the debate, we know little about why the ground we have traveled looks the way that it does. At stake in making assumptions, definitions, and attitudes about literacy more visible in proposals to abolish compulsory composition is finding a way out of an unproductive and cyclical debate that returns us time and time again to the same starting point: criticizing composition instructors and students for not achieving the impossible and pursuing the ostensible problem of illiteracy with mismatched pedagogical solutions. My approach in this inquiry differs from Connors’s, Russell’s, and Fleming’s studies because it features more prominently the vague characterizations and assumptions about literacy that make critiques of compulsory composition possible. In most cases, these assumptions are based on frail and ambiguous conceptualizations of the nature of literacy. These conceptions, as I will show, often emphasize the “strong, uniform, universal, unitary, unwavering nature and impact” of literacy (Graff, “Literacy, Myth, and Legacies” 19). Furthermore, regardless of what position participants take in the debate, I argue they share much in common when it comes to confiding in conceptions, or as Graff terms them, the “continuities and contradictions” of literacy (Graff, *Legacies*). It is by locating, naming, and connecting latent definitions and attitudes about literacy that inform these proposals to theories from the New Literacy Studies that we better understand why literacy remains composition’s most pressing problem *and* solution. With this in mind, I begin by reviewing principal contributors and tenets of the New Literacy Studies, a field that is most certainly familiar to English studies, but perhaps not as well traveled as it should be, especially when it comes to considering critiques of compulsory composition.

## LITERACY STUDIES AND THE ABOLITION DEBATE

Little doubt exists that debates over the differences and similarities between oral and literate cultures have, in part, helped to shape scholars’ attitudes about literacy in English studies more generally. At the center of this debate is Goody and Watt’s “The Consequences of Literacy.” In this often-cited study, the authors argue that the invention of the Greek alphabet led to specific consequences: most notably, transformations on the cognitive level that are symptomatic of a shift from mythical to logical thought. The authors also claim that this cognitive shift produced a host of other social developments, including the rise of democratic systems of government, the development of various forms of social and political organizations, and the capacity for technological progress. For Goody and Watt, cognitive capacities in oral societies are best described as lacking objectivity and relying on formulaic and associative systems of meaning making. When describing how oral societies transmit a “cultural repertoire,” they write: “In the first place, it makes for a directness of relationship between symbol and referent. There can be no reference to ‘dictionary definitions,’ nor can words accumulate the successive layers of historically validated meanings which they acquire in a literate culture” (29). In other words, because oral cultures depend entirely on “vocal inflections and physical

gestures” to communicate, they are unable to obtain distance from words and their referents.

In this claim, we find the assumption (one of many) that supports the dichotomy that Goody and Watt construct between oral and literate cultures. Oral societies lack the cognitive capacity to gain the type of critical distance that allows for a conceptualization of the world that is represented as separate from the moment. Simply put, oral cultures are forever tied to the present. In arguing for the “general differences” between oral and literate cultures, the authors assert, “writing establishes a different kind of relationship between the word and its referent, a relationship that is more general and more abstract, and less closely connected with the particularities of person, place and time, than obtains in oral communication” (44). With this presumption, the perceived ability to represent cognition as something removed from the present—as being able to achieve more objective, critical, and analytical perspectives—becomes one of the defining qualities that distinguishes literate societies from oral ones.

One of the most instructive examples of how this debate from literacy studies informs composition comes from Mike Rose’s “Narrowing the Mind and Page: Remedial Writers and Cognitive Reductionism.” In this study, Rose attends specifically to the problems posed by “great divide” characterizations of literacy, as well as some of its myths and legacies. Rose’s chief concerns are the “troubling consequences” (287) that stem from applying “strong” versions of literacy (like those relying on a “great divide” or “grand dichotomies”) to the theory and practice of basic writing instruction. In so doing, “adolescents and adults are thought to bear cognitive resemblance to (ethnocentric notions of) primitive tribesmen in remote third-world cultures” (287). The tendency, Rose argues, is for composition instructors who subscribe to “great divide” theories to draw generalizations from exceptional cases. These generalizations lead to disturbing conclusions: basic writers lack the cognitive ability to think analytically; they lack critical distance from their own lives and are thus tied socially and philosophically to the present; they believe printed words are concrete things; they are not capable of thinking abstractly about the world they live in (287). Interestingly, and as I will demonstrate, these conclusions are similar to the critiques of freshman composition that have served as the rationales for many calls for the abolition of the first-year requirement.

In addition to attending to the orality/literacy debate, Rose’s essay also delineates a recurring undercurrent that traverses both literacy studies and composition. When “strong theories” of literacy form the theoretical framework for writing pedagogy, such approaches are often symptomatic of a teaching disposition that is asking too much of literacy. In *National Literacy Campaigns and Movements: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff write: “To ask of literacy that it overcome gender discrimination, integrate a society, eliminate inequalities, and contribute to political and social stability is certainly too much” (27). In a similar fashion, Rose is cautious in his treatment of literacy, noting that he does not “mean to deny the profound effects literacy can have on society” (287). Rather, he aspires to question the extent to which “great divide” theories of literacy can evaluate and describe those effects. As Rose suggests, the most pressing danger for writing instructors teaching with simplistic conceptualizations of literacy and its consequences is the tendency to assume

that merely possessing textbooks, classrooms, technology, and a “trained” instructor is, as Graff writes, “fully sufficient for further development of an individual’s literacy and subsequent education, and, of course, for the advancement of that individual” (*Literacy and Historical 27*).

Many scholars in the New Literacy Studies take issue with “great divide” characterizations on both theoretical and methodological levels. For example, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole’s exploration of the social practices of the Vai people of Liberia, detailed in “Unpacking Literacy,” questions many of the epistemological assumptions that define “great divide” positions. The authors argue that, rather than assume universal consequences

of literacy, one must investigate the specific social contexts in which literacy is used. As such, Scribner and Cole’s methodological approach is significantly different from Goody and Watt’s. By combining anthropological fieldwork with psychological research methods, the authors conclude that “literacy-without-schooling is associated with

improved performance on certain cognitive tasks” (136) and that many of the cognitive consequences posited by Goody and Watt are symptomatic of the formal institution of schooling rather than the acquisition of literacy alone. In short, Scribner and Cole question characterizations of literacy that position it as a monolithic symptom of social and psychological change. In so doing, they confront accumulated assumptions about literacy—Harvey Graff calls these the “legacies” of literacy—that inform many of the tenets that support “great divide” characterizations of literacy.

The implications of Graff’s work for the abolition debate are most clear in his discussion of the literacy myth. In *The Labyrinths of Literacy*, Graff writes that “[c]onstituting much of what I call literacy’s central contradictions, these legacies taken together constitute ‘the literacy myth’” (324). Relying on the accumulation of many assumptions about the aims and uses of literacy and inextricably linked with perennial complaints of the “decline” and “crisis” of literacy, the “literacy myth” is a powerful and complex force. Defined broadly, the literacy myth is the abiding belief that merely acquiring literacy guarantees economic prosperity as well as “access to and participation in mainstream institutions” (Cushman et al. 12). In *The Literacy Myth: Cultural Integration and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century*, Graff defines it more specifically: “Primary schooling and literacy are necessary, it is so often repeated, for economic and social development, establishment and maintenance of democratic institutions, individual advancement, and so on. All this, regardless of its veracity, has come to constitute a ‘literacy myth’” (xxxviii). Using a comparative and socio-historical research methodology (examining, among other things, Canadian census data from the nineteenth century), Graff demonstrates that despite institutionally sponsored efforts to legitimize the myths and legacies of literacy, societies have taken different “paths” toward achieving literacy. Furthermore,

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they have done so for reasons other than improving their economic and material situations.

Much is at stake for English studies in rethinking literacy along the historical and theoretical lines posited by the New Literacy Studies, especially Graff's research on the perceived "crisis" and "decline" of literacy as well as the myths that make those perceptions possible. One way of rethinking literacy along these lines is by revisiting calls to abolish compulsory English. Doing so emphasizes the complexity and contradictory nature of the relationship of attitudes about literacy to proposals for abolishing compulsory composition. In a sense, proposals to abolish compulsory composition have been dismissed by scholars in composition because, in many cases, their arguments are perceived as merely elitist. Although this may be a valid assessment of the following studies, I hope to show how these elitist sentiments are inseparably intertwined with what the NLS terms as autonomous and strong theories of literacy. Histories by Connors and Russell overlook this aspect of these essays and represent abolitionists as resolute in their commitment to the abolition of freshman English. However, this next section works toward a new understanding of these proposals as highly ambivalent and contradictory. They are far from resolute, and the elitist sensibilities associated with them are less significant than the vague and contradictory attitudes about literacy as well as the exaggerated expectations about the consequences of possessing literacy that underlie their polemics.

#### THOMAS LOUNSBURY "COMPULSORY COMPOSITION IN COLLEGES"

Nineteen eleven is a significant year for English studies and the abolition debate. By the time Thomas Lounsbury made the first call for the abolition of composition in that year, first-year English as a university subject was over a century old (Bartholomae 1950). Robert Connors marks this time as a threshold moment, suggesting that by 1910 "most issues in composition methodology were decided, one way or another" (*Composition-Rhetoric* 13). James Berlin also sees this period as key, noting in *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* that although the establishment of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in 1883 secured a place for English studies in the curriculum of higher education, it was the development of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in 1911 that signaled a commitment to theorizing and researching the teaching of writing for high school students. However, in the same year that pedagogical methodologies were coalescing around the development of professional organizations and some continuity and agreement in methodology in composition, one of the first indications of disagreement and dissatisfaction emerged: *Harper's Monthly Magazine* published Thomas Lounsbury's article "Compulsory Composition in Colleges."

An Emeritus Professor of English at Yale University, Lounsbury worked in philology and linguistics and was one of the first (along with Edward A. Allen, William Mathews, and George Krapp) to question English instructors' "total acceptance of traditional rigid grammar" (Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric* 150). In *The Standard of Usage in English*, he opposes absolute conceptualizations of grammatical propriety and the writing handbooks that impose such rules on students, arguing that

“in order to have a language become fixed, it is first necessary that those who speak it should become dead” (150). Indeed, Lounsbury’s work on grammar, in part, helped to infuse a “descriptive spirit” into philological and pedagogical practices during the early 1900s (150). Such a disposition places Lounsbury in the company of specialists who questioned notions of grammar prescriptivism and also sought to reform teaching practices towards an end that conceptualized linguistics and language in a way that foreshadows modern attitudes about grammar and language. This orientation makes Lounsbury’s proposal for abolishing composition worthy of closer consideration.

Lounsbury begins his proposal by suggesting that the problems of freshman composition cannot be conceived fully without empathy. “There is nothing so certain,” he writes, “to warp the conclusions of the pure intellect working on this subject as actual experience” (866). Unfortunately, his thesis, which appears well into the article, is little help in determining his principal objections to compulsory composition. In what appears to be an attempt to consolidate his doubts about the course, he notes,

Still, none the less am I thoroughly convinced that altogether undue importance is attached to exercises in English composition, especially compulsory exercises; that the benefits to be derived from the general practice in schools is vastly overrated; that the criticism of themes, even when it is fully competent, is in the majority of cases of little value to the recipient; that in a large number of instances the criticism is and must ever be more or less incompetent; and that when the corrections which are made are made inefficiently and unintelligently, as is too often the case, the results reached are distinctly more harmful than helpful. (869)

Although we appear to have, here, Lounsbury’s reasons for a proposal to abolish compulsory composition, this line of reasoning is, in fact, only tangentially related to the themes, evidence, claims, and rationales marshaled on behalf of his position throughout his study. That is, the scope of Lounsbury’s complaints about freshman English is so broad that it is not clear if abolishing compulsory composition is actually something that he sees as a solution or the problem. His position seems inconsistent, at times, even equivocal, and his ambivalence, I believe, is indicative of only a vague understanding of the purpose and value of literacy in compulsory composition.

For instance, we may find one source of Lounsbury’s ambivalence in the attitudes he expresses about the value of literacy, its relationship to rhetoric, and its role in composition instruction and institutions of learning in general. In disputing the “delusive notion” that “institutions of learning have any monopoly of training in composition,” Lounsbury responds with a question: “Why do men who have never had the advantage of any school training in composition so often express themselves with clearness, directness, and force?” For Lounsbury, the tribulations and successes of Ulysses Grant hold some answers to this question. “It is not probable that General Grant ever had much practice in writing in his youth,” he notes; “What little he did have, it is more than probable he did not profit by. But participation in a mighty struggle, the ceaseless pressure of arduous duties and wearing responsibilities furnished him an intellectual training which it was not in the power of the schools to impart. Hence when he came to write his autobiography, he wrote it with a simplicity and consequent effectiveness which no mere drill in English could have wrought” (875).

This passage from Lounsbury is remarkable for several reasons. First, it is perhaps one of the clearest statements of what he finds to be inadequate about freshman English, namely, the drills and other repetitive exercises aimed toward teaching students to write themes. Clearly, Lounsbury finds such assignments to be inefficient and impractical. Second, Lounsbury's anecdote introduces and bolsters a claim that runs throughout his argument: that pain and misery felt through "participation in a mighty struggle" bring about the desired attributes that formal composition instruction only aspires to provide. We see this idea crop up throughout his study, but most notably in yet another reference to a famous American figure: Abraham Lincoln. Lounsbury notes:

It is not likely that the direct instruction in composition he ever received took up much of his time, if indeed it took up any of it. But in his profession he found imposed upon him as a condition of success the necessity of clear thinking, with its usual accompaniment of clearness of expression. But the further education which produced the matchless simplicity and majesty of the brief Gettysburg oration was the outcome of the discipline of anxious days and sleepless nights, the never-ceasing pressure of the burden of care which waited upon the long agony of the Civil War. As a matter of fact, indeed, there is nothing like misery to improve the style. (875)

Here Lounsbury presents a tendency akin to what Brian Street, Mike Rose, and others from the NLS refer to as a "strong" theory of literacy. Lounsbury's claim is that misery, pain, anguish, and struggle bring about the acquisition of particular cognitive traits and the successful demonstration of "clearness of expression." For Lounsbury, Grant and Lincoln possessed clear thinking, style, and other desirable traits because they struggled through seemingly insurmountable experiences and achieved a "condition of success" in those situations. As such, they possessed the tenacity and willingness to endure various forms of "misery," and in doing so they gained style and clarity of thought and expression. Lounsbury's assertions are reminiscent of how some basic writers are sometimes misunderstood by institutions of learning and composition instructors more specifically. That is, composition students are sometimes seen as lacking the ability to think analytically and clearly about complex philosophical relationships. Because they are unable to demonstrate successfully these traits in academic conventions or other writing assignments, they are sometimes viewed as lazy or similar to cultures lacking literacy. Such understandings misrepresent the cognitive potential and capacities of basic writers as well as non-literate cultures, perpetuating "great divide" conceptions of literacy. The presence of such thinking in this proposal to abolish English is significant because it demonstrates a notable consequence of possessing a "strong" conception of literacy or exaggerated understandings of literacy's powers.

Some might argue that Lounsbury is not talking about literacy at all. Instead, Lounsbury simply wants students to gain experience, endure hard work, and achieve clarity in thought and expression. After all, by invoking abstractions like "clearness of expression," "matchless simplicity," and "style" he is actually (and perhaps unknowingly) discussing tenets of nineteenth-century Scottish rhetoric. Lounsbury, however, is very clear about how he feels about rhetoric specifically, noting, "[i]t has

a value of its own; but it has not the kind of value which is often mistakenly claimed for it. For as grammar is nothing but the generalization of the facts of utterance, so rhetoric is nothing but the generalization of the facts of style" (875). On the one hand, the distinction between rhetoric and grammar that Lounsbury draws is clearly a move intended to anticipate rebuttals to his proposal. Given his complaints about freshman English, a reasonable response to Lounsbury would simply propose an alternative to theme-based writing pedagogy, perhaps something grounded specifically in rhetoric (and in many cases this is what happened in universities). On the other hand, when we examine his attacks on rhetoric more closely, we find that literacy and the ostensible consequences of possessing it are very much at play in his diatribe. He writes: "I call to mind a young man who before beginning his Commencement oration went carefully through the whole of Whately's treatise on rhetoric as a preparatory exercise, and was much astounded to discover, after finishing it, that he could write no better than he did before" (875).

Lounsbury's proposal is indicative of an overly simplistic conception of human cognition. This perspective, coupled with recurrent distinctions between rhetoric and grammar, oratory and writing, and the importance of pain and pleasure in the process of literacy acquisition, demonstrates a quintessential characteristic of being caught in the literacy myth: "The point is that we are in the grips of the 'literacy myth.' We do not know precisely what we mean by literacy or what we expect individuals to achieve from their instruction in and possession of literacy" (Graff, *The Literacy Myth* 323). When we examine more closely the ways that Lounsbury articulates the aims and problems of freshman English in 1911, we find inconsistent understandings and definitions of literacy as well as unrealistic consequences of possessing it. When we treat these strong conceptualizations of literacy as evidence used to argue for the abolition of compulsory composition, it becomes clear that Lounsbury does not know precisely what he expects individuals to achieve from composition instruction.

It is easy to dismiss many of Lounsbury's claims, especially since so many of his musings on freshman composition are, on the level of tone, quite cynical and ironic. However, it is precisely Lounsbury's disposition that caught the attention of Thomas Percival Beyer in 1912 when he published his response to Lounsbury in *Educational Review*. Appearing in the "Discussion" section and titling his response "Anent Compulsory Composition in Colleges," Beyer is clearly conflicted about Lounsbury's proposal. On the one hand, he finds it "the most readable essay on a technical and polemic theme that I have seen in a long while" (77). Furthermore, Beyer is "grateful to Professor Lounsbury" for putting the "classic argument against English in the most cogent way possible" (84). Yet, he objects to the central assumptions driving the essay and the position in which those assumptions put teachers of composition. It is important to examine Beyer's response to Lounsbury because even though he takes issue with most of Lounsbury's assertions, the two scholars share much in common when it comes to the assumptions they make about the powers and place of literacy in compulsory composition.

Beyer is suspicious of theme-based pedagogies, agreeing with Lounsbury that drills in compulsory composition fail in their aims of creating literary geniuses—he calls such assignments "illogical and absurd" (84). However, he questions Lounsbury's assumption that colleges of the

time “retain freshman composition in the required list because they still see the vision of Utopia populated by a nation of Carlyles, Goethes, and Tolstois” (78). He asserts that he has never “heard of a college that set out to produce a race of literary artists.” On the contrary, he knows “of a few, at all events, that are striving to send out men—just men, and perhaps, a leaven of women” (78). Indeed, Beyer’s statement points to divergent attitudes about the aims of freshman English as well as opposing understandings of the purposes of universities at this time. However, what he proposes as a solution to the dilemma presented by freshman English is not so different from the ambivalence and assumptions driving Lounsbury’s proposal.

In the end, Beyer seems dismayed by Lounsbury’s critiques and resents the implications of his article. “Since no honest man could continue to draw a salary for wasteful work,” he writes, “the dilemma presents itself that I am either a knave or a fool. I am a fool if I believe in my work; I am a knave if I do not, in which case I think I am a greater fool than ever for not getting out of it” (84). Despite such feelings he concludes that “composition taught in a sensible normal way does not bore the average freshman, and does contribute to the art of living” (84). For Beyer, a “sensible” and “normal” approach to composition instruction is less systematic, opposed to the “state of extreme mental busy-ness” imposed by theme writing:

Start with description. Teach observation a few weeks, hammer home just about three principles: fidelity to nature, selection of detail, and the value of verbs and words denoting action as well as specific instead of generic terms. Then send him out to describe the people on the street-cars, a football scrimmage, a scene in a play, the chatter of blackbirds in the wild rice, or how it feels to swim or row or race, and I defy the dullest teacher in Christendom to prevent a freshman from sitting up and taking notice. Later he can find delight in narrating some of his own thrilling experiences, or constructing a complication about a young man, his duty, and his sweetheart; and, finally, he can even be induced to tell what he thinks about “College spirit” or “Eligibility rules in athletics.” (83)

Although this approach, according to Beyer, realizes one aim of freshman English—to teach students “to describe a person, a picture, a view, with a fair degree of accuracy, and even present a coherent reason for the particular faith that may be within him” (83)—this alone is not enough. What college students need “more than anything else” are “Between-Times” (86)—the “occasional half-hour of real loafing, and inviting the soul.” However, according to Beyer, there are limits to this loafing. If students write nothing, “the soul that he gets glimmerings of will remain a spiritual embryo. It will never be fixed, and he will never gain confidence in it” (86). Thus, in one sense, freshman English and the requisite drills and tasks that

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constitute the course are the problem: “With a daily theme prodding him, he can never wait for an idea, but writes drivel and grows cynical” (86). On the other hand, freshman English is the solution because without the course students remain intellectually and spiritually undeveloped.

Even though Lounsbury and Beyer are on opposite sides of the abolition debate—Lounsbury opposes the requirement and Beyer seems to desire reforming the teaching of composition—both of their arguments are sustained by an abiding belief in the power of literacy to bring about profound cognitive and spiritual transformations. Their exchange highlights the ways in which ambiguous definitions of literacy and exaggerated expectations of possessing it motivate proposals both for and against compulsory composition. Taken together, these essays are an early example of how the debate over compulsory composition involves much more than disagreements over pedagogy or the aptitude of students and instructors. From the perspective of the NLS, we may understand the attitudes about literacy that underlie these studies as linked to a tradition of characterizing literacy in a way that exaggerates its powers. This move is based on simplistic assumptions not only of human cognition but also of the role of cognition in the relationship of literacy to teaching, learning, and educational reforms.

### OSCAR JAMES CAMPBELL THE FAILURE OF FRESHMAN ENGLISH

According to Connors, unlike Lounsbury’s “Compulsory College Composition,” which was published in *Harper’s Magazine* and taken seriously enough to spark a rebuttal from Beyer in *Educational Review* in 1912, Oscar James Campbell’s proposal was met only with reformist arguments and dissent. Despite such criticism, Campbell’s “The Failure of Freshman English” is one of the few proposals discussed by all existing histories of the abolition debate, as well as by most respected histories of composition. In this section, I discuss aspects of Campbell’s study that have been overlooked by historians of writing instruction. In particular, I show how Campbell’s essay depends on what Jack Goody refers to as a “Great Dichotomy” and Ruth Finnegan calls the “Great Divide” conception of literacy. As I discussed in the first part of this article, “great divide” conceptions of literacy are indicative of a theoretical assumption about learning that inaccurately elevates those possessing literacy to positions of dominance over those that do not. By attending to the role of Campbell’s attitude about literacy, we understand better how the rhetoric of abolitionism depends on generalizations that accompany the literacy myth.

Campbell is a compelling figure for historians of composition and the abolition debate because of his use of metaphor and the hostility of his rhetoric. He begins his tirade on freshman English by comparing compulsory composition to a monster, specifically a “Frankenstein” which was created by a former colleague, Barrett Wendell, and has gone awry. He chides the course for forcing “teachers of English to attempt what they know is impossible and [building] up false ideas and false hopes of the educational process which vitiates undergraduate work in almost the entire curriculum” (178). As contemporary as his assessment might sound to us, such sentiments should not be confused with

progressive understandings of literacy; in fact, more than any other proposal to abolish freshman English, Campbell's study is marked by inconsistent and contradictory conceptions of literacy. For example, Campbell asserts, "Only through the books of ages remote from his own can an individual completely emancipate himself from the provinciality of time and place" (183). Which is to say, without "works of literature" in the tradition of liberal culture, students are like primitive creatures, unable to gain the critical distance and cognitive skills to objectively understand their position in time and space. In this same vein, Campbell is convinced that literature—not compulsory composition (and the sophisticated levels of literacy that literature makes possible)—leads to extraordinary consequences. "Without some modicum of thinking," he explains, "one cannot write at all, and it is emphatically true that one cannot ever write any better than he can think" (179). To be sure, Campbell's statement is indicative of a "great divide" conception of literacy in which reductive epistemological assumptions related to the perceived consequences of being literate inform his position on compulsory composition. However, even more important to note are the ways Campbell's claims about the relationship between thinking and writing are symptomatic of a model of language acquisition and production, a model that situates literacy as an independent variable in that process. After all, Campbell is not only suggesting that freshman English students are illiterate—or "without letters" (Rose, "The Language of Exclusion" 597); in his view, they are also without minds.

However, unlike Lounsbury, Campbell's opposition to the requirement is not completely supported by strong theories of literacy that subscribe to the autonomous model. In fact, at times, Campbell seems to question specifically the pedagogical effectiveness of instruction based on autonomous conceptions of literacy. For instance, in discussing the methods employed by composition courses of the time he notes, "The existence of the course and the methods it habitually employs are based on the fallacious notion that good writing is a *Ding an Sich*, a separate independent technique. That is, that it can be engendered and grown in a kind of intellectual vacuum" (178). In a way, Campbell sees the aims of composition courses as varying from moment to moment; they cannot be defined and achieved in a vacuum or apart from other contexts. He supports this position further by drawing on an analogy intended to demonstrate the flawed thinking behind prevailing approaches to composition at the time. "If the proponents of this course have any philosophy," he writes, "it is that one learns to write sentences as one learns to play scales on the piano and for the same purpose" (178). What Campbell means by this is that it is assumed if a piano student masters particular skills in both the major and minor scales, s/he may successfully and equally apply such skills to "the successful rendition of a Beethoven sonata or of a Franz Liszt rhapsody" (178). Campbell concedes that his "music analogy is very imperfect" (178) but believes that this thinking is behind compulsory composition instruction at the time. More specifically, Campbell senses that composition instructors treat "words, phrases, and sentences" as if they are notes on a scale that correspond to a keyboard, as if language itself is "external to the process of playing anything and independent of it" (178). Although Campbell fails to offer solutions to this problem specifically, he does speculate as to why such instruction continues, and he lays blame not on composition instructors or students, but

on administrators and professors in other departments.

This assertion marks a curious shift in tone in Campbell's essay. Up to this point, Campbell's complaints about compulsory composition are not directed at any person in particular. Instead, he seems only interested in aspects of the course that support his claims regarding its ineffectiveness and inefficiency. However, when he speculates about how and why universities have allowed the situation with compulsory composition to continue so inefficiently and for so long, he explains,

Our students, then, do not take seriously our pedagogic pretensions, but the administrators of the universities and the professors in other departments than our own most emphatically do. Presidents and deans continue to say by word of mouth, and by word of pen, that the principal business of an English department is to teach all the students in a university how to write well. Universities spend vast sums of money on that service; in fact, so much that the budget of the English department is commonly about twice as large as that of any other department in the undergraduate college. It is natural then that the administration believes that it is entitled to much more positive results than it is obtaining. We should not be surprised that it keeps insisting that the English department must discover new and better methods of doing its main job. (180)

Unlike Lounsbury's proposal, in which institutional pressures are latent and tangentially related to his argument, Campbell responds directly to pressures from the administrative order of universities. This passage highlights

specifically the ways that assumptions about the purpose and powers of literacy overlap with administrative pressures. Campbell's proposal is motivated largely by exaggerated understandings of literacy's powers, and he perceives that such attitudes prevail in administrative circles as well. However, and most importantly, he objects to these attitudes if they originate from deans and university presidents. What lies at the heart of the debate over compulsory composition

in Campbell's argument is not the compulsory nature of the course or its pedagogical methods. Instead, competing attitudes about literacy are actually motivating this conflict, and the confusion surrounding these definitions, attitudes, and characterizations grows out of competing visions of the purposes of universities altogether.

Many scholars, like David R. Russell, would argue that Campbell's latent attitudes about literacy and the institutional contexts complicating his position are less relevant than his romantic

*66 What lies at the heart of the debate over compulsory composition in Campbell's argument is not the compulsory nature of the course or its pedagogical methods. Instead, competing attitudes about literacy are actually motivating this conflict, and the confusion surrounding these definitions, attitudes, and characterizations grows out of competing visions of the purposes of universities altogether.*

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commitments to liberal culture. In “Romantics on Writing: Liberal Culture and the Abolition of Composition Courses,” Russell contends that “arguments used to attack” (132) compulsory composition are consistent with the guiding precepts of liberal culture specifically. Although I concede that Campbell’s investment in the Arnoldian ideal of the “well-rounded man” informs his position on compulsory composition, I believe that his explicit statement about and irritation with the expectations of “the administration” and “professors in other departments” hold important implications for understanding how the debate over compulsory composition is perpetuated.

Campbell shows us that the engine of this debate is yet another myth. Mike Rose calls this the “myth of transience,” or the persistent belief “in the American university that if we can just do x or y, the problem will be solved—in five years, ten years, or a generation—and higher education will be able to return to its real work”

(“The Language of Exclusion” 599).

Rose claims the myth is a complete fiction, but a potentially useful one with significant implications. In one sense, the myth of transience provides hope, as every generation of scholars’ problems are new to those who tangle with them, and when faced with problems, people must believe that a solution exists (600). On the other hand, the myth of transience—much like Graff’s

*“From this perspective we may understand the Great Debate as sustained not by arguments over composition’s effectiveness (nor quibbles over which pedagogical approach is the best) but by competing attitudes about the nature of literacy—characterizations and attitudes that, as I have shown in my discussion of Campbell, are made latent by confiding simultaneously in Rose’s myth of transience and Graff’s literacy myth.”*

understanding of the literacy myth—tends to obscure history, especially those aspects of the history of higher education that are complex, dynamic in nature, and not easily defined or understood (600). Yet, despite its tendency to blind scholars to “historical reality,” the myth of transience persists. “Like any golden age or utopian myth,” Rose writes, “the myth of transience assures its believers that the past was better or that the future will be” (600). When considered in the context of Campbell’s situation, where ongoing debates between scholars and administrators seem defined by differences over the effectiveness of composition, we find the myth of transience both obfuscating the actual problems prolonging the debate—competing definitions of literacy—and also temporarily reconciling these seemingly incompatible positions. In other words, this myth simultaneously elides attitudes about literacy and temporarily resolves the confusion that stems from competing visions for compulsory composition. From this perspective we may understand the Great Debate as sustained not by arguments over composition’s effectiveness (nor quibbles over which pedagogical approach is the best) but by competing attitudes about the nature of literacy—characterizations and attitudes that, as I have shown in my discussion of Campbell, are made latent by confiding simultaneously in Rose’s myth of transience and Graff’s literacy myth.

It should not come as a surprise, then, that like Lounsbury, Campbell never articulates specifically how he defines literacy. However, when we examine more closely what Campbell believes is ultimately at stake in the mission of universities, a more precise definition of the incentives of literacy becomes evident. “It is undoubtedly trite,” he asserts, “to say that the success of a democratic state depends upon the sort of life that is lived by the individuals who compose it” (183). Furthermore, these individuals must be “self-reliant” yet “sensitive to the needs of other individuals,” especially when it comes to assessing “the impact of their own personalities” on others. For Campbell, only one type of literacy possesses the power to cultivate the kind of citizens that can sustain his vision of a successful democracy. David Barton calls this “the literary view of literacy” (168). Of its powers Campbell notes, “Literature cultivates and sharpens this sensitivity by enabling the individual to share, and thus to understand, a great variety of human experiences” (183). According to Campbell, “every work of literature” is an “essential part of the living tissue of the life of every age.” And only through this type of literacy or “the books of the ages remote from his own can an individual completely emancipate himself from the provinciality of time and place” (183).

Although Campbell occasionally expresses notions that question autonomous conceptions of literacy, his literary view of literacy clearly subscribes to great divide conceptions. Without great books, students remain tied to the present, unable to gain the cognitive faculties to distance themselves from the moment; according to this theory of literacy, they forever lack the interpretive skills and perspective necessary to deal with abstract ideals and philosophical problems in sophisticated ways. Thus—and despite Campbell’s many complaints directed toward the shortcomings of theme-based pedagogies—the problems of compulsory composition may be boiled down to a course that is not cultivating the tastes and behaviors that literature provides. In this way, Campbell’s literary view of literacy was, on the one hand, a solution to the ostensible shortcomings of compulsory composition. Yet, because this view of literacy was not translating into the type of classroom practices that would meet administrators’ expectations, it was also the problem.

Other significant contradictions are apparent in this scenario. Campbell’s essay also shows how incongruent great divide and literary views of literacy can be with the exaggerated, generalized, and universalized expectations of myths of literacy that often inform institutional and administrative pressures. Certainly, as my reading of Campbell demonstrates, competing and contradictory characterizations of literacy complicate efforts to evaluate the aims and effectiveness of freshman English. However, it is also important to remember that structures of authority and power relations among faculty and administrators are also at stake in the rhetoric of abolitionism. We get some sense of these pressures when we examine further Campbell’s tone and his concerns about the working conditions of composition instructors.

David Russell contends that even though the “rhetorical contexts differ” between Lounsbury and Campbell, the “rhetorical strategies” of the proposals are essentially the same. According to Russell, Campbell, like Lounsbury, uses irony as a trope to rally his audience around the “cardinal principle of Romanticism” and liberal culture (135). Certainly, Campbell’s article contains moments of

sarcasm. But irony and sarcasm are not the predominant traits of this proposal to abolish freshman English. On the contrary, Campbell's proposal is remarkable for another, equally compelling response: namely, his concerns over the teaching conditions for instructors of freshman English:

But, for all that, crowds of young men and women have been lured into the teaching of English by the great numbers of positions annually open at the bottom of the heap, and there they stick, contaminating one another with their discouragement and rebellion. No wonder they are now organizing, as other proletariats the world over are organizing, to assert and foster their class interests. In almost every institution in which there is a chapter of the teacher's union, instructors in English form its central core. (181-182)

Campbell's proposal is interesting because it is a spirited polemic and occasionally sarcastic, but here, he is also speaking candidly about the challenges of composition instruction at a particular moment. In this passage, Campbell remarks on the exploitative working conditions that many composition instructors experienced leading up to this period. Campbell would have been especially attuned to such conditions and feedback because, just four years earlier, he held a position of influence during a time in which the profession was experiencing a "proliferation of debates" (Roemer et al. 380). In "Reframing the Great Debate on First-Year Writing," Marjorie Roemer, Lucille M. Schultz, and Russel K. Durst report that because of "strong divisions among college English instructors" in the 1930s, the NCTE formed a committee to issue a report on the state of college English. Campbell presided over that committee, and according to the authors, "he [Campbell] argued strongly against the first-year course in a way that is very consistent with previous abolitionist arguments" (380). This may be true, but more interesting is that Campbell specifically articulates in the report the constraints and demands of his cultural moment, and he does so in a way that never happens in his proposal to abolish freshman English. This is important to note because contemporary receptions of Campbell's abolitionist proposal cast him as a literary elitist frustrated by the way that composition attenuates the "usefulness of literary education" (Connors, "Abolition Debate" 285). And yet, a closer look at the perspective emerging in the following report indicates that Campbell's position was much more complex. In *The Teaching of College English* he notes:

Adequate mastery of the English language, however, should mean much more than the attainment of mere correctness and literate respectability. It should imply effective communication of ideas. Many cooperative enterprises essential to the existence of a sound social organization are dependent on a fairly wide diffusion of this ability, particularly among our social and political leaders. President Roosevelt's skill in explaining to the entire nation the policies and actions of the government, particularly in the banking crisis of 1933, created overnight a new attitude toward our entire economic structure. This, in turn, has contributed largely to its safety and to the revival of its orderly operation. (7)

Certainly, when we proceed beyond the introduction, we find the reductive reasoning and elitist rationales that typify criticisms of compulsory composition during this time (and perhaps even

today). However, in this passage, for a brief moment, Campbell's framing of how he understands pressures brought on by the Great Depression and other social developments give us reason to look beyond existing assessments of his role in the debate. Considering these social and economic contexts alongside the latent attitudes about literacy in his proposal to abolish composition lends perspective and provides greater understanding of the complex pressures that have helped to shape the abolition debate more generally.

For instance, let us return to Campbell's "The Failure of Freshman English," where he predicts that teachers of composition would continue to organize and protest the unfair working conditions and drudgery of freshman English as, he writes, "other proletariats the world over are organizing" (182). As problematic as his comparison is, in noting that such dissatisfaction and pressure is coming from all over the world, not simply from English departments or universities, Campbell underscores the ways in which many pro-abolitionist proposals are responding to and using to their advantage various cultural, social, and economic pressures. In Campbell's case, he seems to suggest that if composition is not abolished, the "crowds of young men and women" who have been "lured into the teaching of English" will organize and revolt with the intention of overthrowing the "Freshman English machine" (181) . . . or so he seems to hope.

It would be easy, I think, to dismiss such statements as hyperbolic—which may be one reason scholars have ignored this aspect of Campbell's study—but from the perspective of the New Literacy Studies, we may read Campbell's predictions and concerns with the material conditions of composition in a new light. Above all, Campbell's statements indicate that his position, like Lounsbury's, is significantly more complex than once thought, and as I argue, this added dimension and nuance may be traced to Campbell's latent attitudes about and characterizations of literacy specifically. In a sense, Campbell's hopes for literacy span the spectrum of "expectations of what it means to read and write, and what might follow from those practices attitudinally, cognitively, individually, and collectively" (Graff, "The Literacy Myth at Thirty" 639). Such expectations, as Graff reminds us, are intimately connected to "imprecise, yet progressively grander conceptions" (639) of what literacy means to us. For Campbell, it is precisely grand conceptions that have lured English teachers to the "Freshman English machine." "They (composition instructors) want to be raised out of the drudgery," Campbell writes, "of marking futilely conceived and futilely executed exercises in words, words, words. Their work, they realize, has no relation whatever to the subject to which, in hopeful youth, they resolved to dedicate their lives" (182). In the end, then, Campbell's position on compulsory composition is motivated by the imprecise, and to be sure, highly varied hopes of instructors, aspirations which have been dashed by the drudgery of teaching composition—hopes that remain inextricably linked with the expectations they associate with attaining literacy. Ultimately, Campbell's suggestion is to abolish compulsory composition in order to embrace the "legitimate duties and prized opportunities" (185) that accompany a curriculum devoted to "English literature" (182). More "words, words, words," indeed, but only the kind that adhere to his great divide conception of literacy. More words that demonstrate a one-to-one relationship between conception and execution. More words that support

a strong theory of literacy that situates the act of reading and writing as a solitary activity—as an independent variable in the composing process of freshman students.

### MAKING LITERACY LEGIBLE IN COMPOSITION'S HISTORY

As I have shown, early critiques of composition from the likes of Thomas Lounsbury and Oscar James Campbell should be rhetorically situated with an eye toward latent characterizations

“*Literacy is similar to other critical terms like ‘narrative,’ ‘communication,’ and ‘ethics’ in the sense that it is simultaneously at home and without a home, always traversing the many fields and disciplines that attempt to pin it down, characterize it, and give it value.*”

of literacy specifically. Throughout this study I have taken an historical perspective, revealing how relative pressures to both abolish and maintain the requirement of freshman English are based on, among other things, exaggerated understandings of literacy's powers. Despite its historical and thematic commitments, this study does not offer history as the sole justification for discussing literacy and

its role in the Great Debate over compulsory composition. Ultimately, my purpose is to make more legible persistent and tenacious assumptions about literacy in early abolitionist studies not simply for the sake of doing so, but because these assumptions and attitudes underlie all the work that we do.

That said, one reason why English scholars might shy away from explicit engagement with underlying attitudes about literacy in the history of composition is because, despite prevailing wisdom, literacy does not *belong* to English studies nor to any of its subfields. Literacy is similar to other critical terms like “narrative,” “communication,” and “ethics” in the sense that it is simultaneously at home and without a home, always traversing the many fields and disciplines that attempt to pin it down, characterize it, and give it value. However, what makes literacy different from these expressions is that more often than not, teacher-researchers characterize, employ, and understand literacy in terms of the perceived consequences of possessing it. Nowhere are the implications of this assumption more evident than in Stephen North's *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*. In the conclusion of his study, North laments the consequences of unacknowledged assumptions about literacy, noting,

We want to believe that every American needs to know how to read and write. The result is that no academic topic seems quite so durable a legislative—and media and popular—concern as America's apparently chronic literacy crisis: the real or imagined breakdowns in the reading and writing that we consider so central to the successful operation of our democracy. With that sort of presence always looming over Composition, anything can happen. (375).

What is implied in North's passage, which functions as an epigraph to my study, is that

although literacy is one of the principal ends of composition theory and application, attitudes about literacy's powers, purposes, and position in the field and society at large remain unacknowledged and misunderstood. My study demonstrates that such confusion with respect to literacy was the case when Lounsbury published his article in *Harper's Magazine* in 1911, when Campbell levied his critiques against composition in 1939, and when North published his now seminal examination of the field in 1987. Not surprisingly, little has changed, especially with respect to our understanding of the fundamental nature of literacy and its relationship to education.

As recently as June 2013, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences published a report entitled, *The Heart of the Matter*. In it they call for a recommitment to a "broad, comprehensive, and balanced" educational approach, one that they describe as "distinctly American." The authors point to several reasons for renewed interest in the liberal arts and the humanities more generally. Chief among these is "[p]arents are not reading to their children as frequently as they once did." According to the Commission on Humanities and Social Sciences, asked to compile the report on behalf of the AAAS, this fact, coupled with declining training for K-12 teachers and reduced funding for international training programs, holds "grave, long-term consequences for the nation" (Commission 9).

As my examination of Lounsbury's and Campbell's studies reveals, perennial notions of crisis and decline go hand in hand with imprecise definitions of literacy, exaggerated claims about the powers of literacy, and the tendency to invest in literacy myths. Such tendencies underlie the logic of proposed solutions in the AAAS's report as well. The commission's most prominent solution to problems facing the humanities is to "[s]upport full literacy as the foundation for all learning" (10). Despite the commission's intention to rearticulate the relevance of the humanities, the report actually invokes an ambiguously defined and empty call for "full literacy," a proposition that, in the end, seems mismatched to the problems at hand. The NLS, specifically Harvey J. Graff's work on the literacy myth, teaches us that empty calls for educational reform often function as red herrings for matters that are more deserving of our concern. The AAAS's call for "full literacy" is ostensibly effective because it resonates with the general public's desire for easy answers to educational challenges; however, it does little to attenuate or explain the disturbing consequences of shrinking state budgets, which strike more directly and effectively at the heart of the matter.

Grandiose educational reforms linked to vaguely defined terms and exaggerated expectations about literacy should remind us of why examining the history of composition from the perspective of the New Literacy Studies is so important. The debate over compulsory composition—indeed, the history of composition itself—can function as a sort of laboratory to examine, test, and explore how definitions of literacy emerge from, overlap with, and contest institutional, cultural, and economic contexts. Rereading Lounsbury's and Campbell's polemics from the perspective of the NLS not only opens up new lines of thinking about the authors' historical contexts, but it also reminds us to sharpen our understanding, attitudes, and, most importantly, the definitions of literacy that we rely on to face the challenges of composition instruction in our current moment.

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